

Wash. gasworks site contains pollution

BREMERTON, Wash. (AP)

Heavy concentrations of cancer-causing chemicals have been discovered underground at an old industrial site in West Bremerton.

The 3.7-acre site has been under study for potential development. There are no obvious human exposures to the cancer-causing chemicals, but further studies are being done. One question is whether any of the chemicals have leached into Puget Sound.

Experts suspect the worst compounds were spilled from a coal-gasification plant that operated at the site from the 1930s into the 1950s. Similar sites across the United States have had to undergo cleanups costing millions of dollars.

Gasification plants, which turned coal into a gas used for heating and lighting, were known to produce a group of chemicals called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs. Some PAHs are believed to cause cancer in humans.

Trip McConkey's father, Paul, purchased much of the coal-gasification site years ago.

"According to consultants I have been able to talk to, coal sludge is not something you want to dig up if it's not going anywhere," McConkey told The Kitsap Sun.

In one location at the Old Bremerton Gasworks site, the total concentration of cancer-causing PAHs in the soil was 155 milligrams per kilogram. That's 1,555 times higher than the state cleanup standard of 0.1 milligrams per kilogram, according to a summary of findings in a preliminary report by GeoEngineers, a Seattle consulting firm.

That "hot spot" is a location where a "gas holder column" once stored the coal gas for pipeline distribution.

Joanne LaBaw of the Environmental Protection Agency has been supervising studies at the site. She said she was waiting for further results including samples of sediments along the shoreline before drawing any conclusions.

Bremerton's public works director said he was especially interested in hearing about potential cleanup options.

"Hopefully, it will be a practical package," said Paul Williams, the director. "I hope it will suggest something that will allow future development of the upland portion of the site."

If Bremerton acquired the property, the city would be eligible for cleanup funding totaling 50 percent of the cost or more.

McConkey said his family would be amenable to just about any option, whether the city takes over the property or the McConkeys eventually operate a business on the site.

McConkey said he has talked to numerous experts about what might be needed to clean up the site. "Nobody can give me any idea of a dollar amount," he said.

Ecology spokesman Larry Altose said the site has been listed as a Puget Sound Initiative project, meaning it has been given priority in the effort to clean up Puget Sound. "If EPA wasn't working on it, we would have picked it up," he said.

Under state law, Ecology is required to track down the entire plume of pollution, according to Altose.

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